10th ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL ISSUE OF *CRITICAL RACE AND WHITENESS STUDIES*

Beyond White Virtue: Reflections on the First Decade of Critical Race and Whiteness Studies in the Australian Academy

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This article undertakes two related tasks. Firstly, it provides one account of the origins of the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association (ACRAWSA) in 2003 and considers some of its significant events, publications and relationships. Secondly, it reflects on the survival of critical race and whiteness studies (CRWS) in the cultural space of the neo-liberal university. The arguments of three critical race and whiteness studies scholars are used to support me on this journey. To understand the challenges of thinking, speaking and writing critically about matters of race and whiteness, I draw on David Theo Goldberg's distinction between anti-racism and anti-racialism in The Threat of Race (2009). *I draw on Sara Ahmed's study* On Being Included (2012) *to explain an increasing disarticulation between an anti-racist politics centred on equality— on the one hand—and 'diversity' talk and practice—on the other. The last part of the talk turns to the matter of Indigenous sovereignty, drawing on a key concept from the work of ACRAWSA's founding president, Aileen Moreton-Robinson. I argue that ACRAWSA's focus on everyday manifestations of the "possessive investment in patriarchal white sovereignty" (2011) have provided intellectual and ethical resilience in the face of the neo-liberal university's radically individualising trajectory. I conclude with a call to scholars working within CRWS to resist the gendered temptation of white virtue as we enter the Association's second decade.*

Keywords: race, whiteness, virtue, everyday life, academia

Timelines and Milestones

In 2013 I was invited to speak at the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association (ACRAWSA) conference as the first Vice President and

member of our first executive formed after the *Critical Contexts and Crucial Conversations: Whiteness and Race* symposium convened by Aileen Moreton-Robinson in April 2002 on the Gold Coast with funding secured from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. My reflections on our first decade will necessarily be partial ones. There are as many stories of ACRAWSA's first decade as there are members. Rather than attempt to speak the truth about our organisation, I have searched for and will seek to communicate one vision of why ACRAWSA was formed, what it has achieved and what remains to be done.

The *Critical Contexts and Crucial Conversations: Whiteness and Race* symposium aimed to be a meeting of like-minded scholars committed to making visible the variegated visual register of race in a country that continued to be politically, legally and culturally shaped by the legacies of *Terra Nullius* and the White Australia policy. We decided that for these vital conversations to continue beyond the occasional symposium, we needed to establish a formal organisational presence within the academy.[1] An interim board was formed comprising Aileen, myself, Jane Haggis, Susanne Schech, Ben Wadham and Ingrid Tufvesson. In the first year we established the ACRAWSA website and e-journal with funding Aileen secured from the Queensland Department of Education and Training under their reconciliation initiatives fund. The next ACRAWSA symposium was at Flinders University in 2004 followed by a major conference in 2005 organised at Queensland University, titled *Whiteness and the Horizons of Race*, which featured David Roedigger as a keynote speaker. The following year's conference was organised by Sydney members of the executive and facilitated the participation of critical race theorists David Theo Goldberg and Cheryl Harris as international keynotes. Subsequent conferences have brought us international queer theorists of race and whiteness including Sara Ahmed, Jasbir Puar, and David Eng, as well as critical Indigenous studies scholars including Chris Anderson and Brendan Hokowhito. Australian and New Zealand based intellectual leaders in the field who have framed our annual and biennial discussions include Moreton-Robinson, Jon Stratton, Suvendrini Perera, Irene Watson, Rebecca Stringer and Sandy O' Sullivan.

Many individuals have volunteered for executive and representative roles since ACRAWSA's formation. In addition to the founding executive members named above they include: Damien Riggs, Angela Pratt, Adrian Carton, Angela Leitch, Toula Nicolacopoulos, Margaret Allen, Anna Szorenyi, Catherine Koerner, Mehal Krayem, Anne Barton, Jane Haggis, Goldie Osuri, Tracy Bunda, Peter Gale, Lara Palombo, Wendy Brady, Maryrose Casey, Alia Imtuoal, Suvendrini Perera, Emma Kowal, Steve Larkin, Alan Han, Kathleen Connellan, Holly Randell-Moon, Rose Carnes, Sharon Meagher, Sarah Cefai, Dona Cayetana, and Sharlene Leroy-Dyer.

I have named just some of the people who have identified themselves with and worked to advance the project of critical race and whiteness studies in Australia. Now I want to pause for a moment to consider what this naming might or might not mean. I see ACRAWSA as a unique intellectual space which has the potential to reorient our relationship to individuality itself. Outside ACRAWSA I can be Dr. Fiona Nicoll, Fiona or "Fi" as a colleague, a teacher, a daughter, a niece and a friend. In contrast, ACRAWSA invites and requires me to situate myself within historical and continuing structures of privilege and possession. So I write this article conscious that I am a white woman whose *habitus* is shaped by the

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[1] Correspondence with Aileen Moreton-Robinson.

middle-class profession of teaching and the Christian missionary values of my family which have been in Australia since the mid nineteenth century through migration from Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall.

In spite of my strong commitment to secular values and critical race pedagogy I can nevertheless embody and perpetuate racist cultural practices forged during settler colonialism and refined as Australia emerged into the twentieth century as a white racial state. My research begins with the recognition that we are all embedded in this history and social context in different ways—as older and newer migrants to this country of Aboriginal countries—and that this embeddedness limits what it is possible for us to see and to know. While it is easy to write this in the relative solitude of my home office, it is harder to live and to work with this recognition in everyday life.

Paradoxically our ability to be effective intellectuals serving the socially transformative agenda of critical race and whiteness studies can be limited by our position as professional academics with expertise in cultural and social criticism. It is in this context that Ahmed (2012) suggests:

> When criticality becomes an ego ideal, it can participate in not seeing complicity. Perhaps criticality as an ego ideal offers a fantasy of being seeing … critical whiteness might operate as a way of not seeing in the fantasy of being seeing: the critical white subjects, by seeing their whiteness, might *not* see themselves as participating in whiteness in the same way. (p. 179)

In a similar vein, George Yancy (2012) explains that embedded racism is often opaque to white people. Anti-racism for white people in everyday life is simplistically conceived as an ethical decision not to cross a moral line that separates good (non-racist) and bad (racist) individuals. In contrast, CRWS demands that we become better at seeing and dealing with racism that is at once inside and outside of us. To encapsulate the argument to come in a nutshell: my journey with CRWS has become one in which being good and well-intentioned are less important than *doing better* at anti-racist work to unsettle possessive claims to white sovereignty in this place.

ACRAWSA was always going to be a challenging inter-subjective space but never a boring one. Our association was formed against prevailing tides of history which would bring a barbaric approach to asylum seekers and a retreat from public engagement with Indigenous rights together with a revival of paternalistic discourses and policies. To work with critical race and whiteness studies in universities during the Howard years was to be perceived by colleagues and students as being on the wrong side of history. The Rudd Labour government provided a momentary reprieve from this hostility towards matters involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships. One of the most vivid indicators of the power of publicly recognising Indigenous grievances was in my lecture theatres. To speak about the 'stolen generations' of Indigenous children prior to Kevin Rudd's apology in 2007 was to experience a significant number of students walking out of the room in protest. After the apology the walk outs stopped. Now that Tony Abbott has taken Indigenous Affairs under his portfolio, our classroom dynamics have changed once again. Fun times!

As I step back from the teaching coalface to reflect on the inter-subjective dynamics of ACRAWSA's first decade, there are three issues that seem endemic to a project like ours. I believe that our continual acknowledgement of and

working through these issues will ensure ACRAWSA's survival in the face of criticisms that our work is no longer necessary, that our work is too hard or too dangerous, or that our work is misguided, simplistic or naive.

The first issue is: who does most of the really heavy lifting? Often in the life of ACRAWSA the work of gaining funding for our websites, conferences and journals has fallen to our Indigenous members, most notably Aileen Moreton-Robinson. As non-Indigenous members of ACRAWSA we need to keep developing creative ways to bring financial resources and institutional support for our work. It is also vital that we share successful strategies of generating institutional and external support with one another and develop persuasive and seductive strategies of representing our participation in ACRAWSA to our academic colleagues and supervisors.

The second issue that arises within ACRAWSA is a tendency to see and to represent our expertise in CRWS as project of credentialisation that, once accomplished, can be moved on from. This tendency is so pronounced that it feels instinctive. Of course, after working in this area for more than 10 years, I want to be able to say "OK. I get it!", provide some footnotes from international critical race theorists as evidence of my savviness and move onto areas of research that are less politically fraught and personally challenging. It is true that continuing to work in CRWS after an initial process of credentialisation is not a great academic career move. I recently found myself defending my work in CRWS to a promotions committee:

> I started working in CRWS to understand a set of problems related to race and Indigenous sovereignty in the late 1990s and thought that I would be finished with this work by now. Unfortunately the problems that CRWS studies addresses have remained so I will continue to work in this area until such time as they are no longer relevant.

I think the unspoken view of several committee members was 'Sure. Go for it! In your own time.' My everyday experience of CRWS work is one of rubbing up against an institution which doesn't see why it should be paying for this kind of research and teaching and against a significant minority of students who are angry because they didn't *sign up* to learn about this kind of thing when they enrolled in courses about media, communication and culture. Not on *our* clock. Not in *my* degree. I was extremely lucky on this occasion that a powerful member of the promotion committee valued the very work in CRWS that my managers had urged me to downplay when I made my case.

While some publications may count towards your academic track record, most of the time CRWS will feel like—and in many respects be—a 'second job'. So approaching CRWS as credentialisation would seem to be the only rational thing to do. But it is not the most effective thing to do if we are in the business of socially transformative scholarship. If we are going to have CRWS as our second job, we better find ways to enjoy this work and to communicate this enjoyment to our students and colleagues. My own enjoyment comes from the new ways of seeing and being in the world that CRWS enables. This kind of scholarship brings hope to staff and students otherwise debilitated by the punitive environment of everyday life within the neo-liberal university.

The third issue that ACRAWSA may be unique in posing is managing desires for a form of cultural capital acquired through proximity to a value that Aileen and I

describe as 'Professorial blackness'. As a long-term colleague of Aileen's, I have sometimes felt like a human vending machine when I am approached by people who hope I can dispense a ticket to a private audience with her. News flash: I can't. While I understand this desire for proximity to Professorial blackness, it is important to interrogate the drives behind it. Do we desire proximity to Professorial blackness to provide a guarantee of our credentials in CRWS? If so, what does this say about the kind of racial state we find ourselves in? And what does it say about the racial disciplines that are specific to the neo-liberal university? More specifically: how might proximity to the figure of the black female professor work ideologically to secure patriarchal white sovereignty's possessive claim to virtue?

To illustrate the material stakes at the heart of my argument about CRWS work I will briefly consider two videos about the 'Basics Card'. The first one is produced by Centrelink, the social security arm of the Australian Federal government, and the second one is a parodic mashup of the former. The Basics Card is a policy tool for administering welfare payments in Australia. It was introduced as a way to govern the everyday expenditure of residents in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory as part of a Federal 'Intervention' in 2007[2] intended to protect vulnerable women and children from the effects of unhealthy consumption choices. Quarantining a portion of payments that might have otherwise been spent on alcohol, cigarettes and pornography, the card provides credits for redemption at designated retail outlets. The extension of the Basics Card to encompass certain categories of non-Indigenous citizens several years after its introduction provides the appearance of a race-blind policy. However, while this change avoids charges of formal discrimination levelled at the Intervention, the Basics Card continues to facilitate racialised welfare administration since the urban and regional areas chosen for its extension are also home to significant populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The official Centrelink video depicts a Basics Card user as a well-dressed and apparently white Australian woman compliantly availing herself of its 'protections' against dangerous or excessive consumptions. She is shown purchasing groceries at the supermarket and making inquiries on the telephone. Centrelink's construction of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) calls 'colour blind racism' is underscored by the use of the terms 'John Citizen'/'Jane Citizen' on the cards shown and the voiceover of an apparently Australian male with British modulations to his accent.[3]

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[2] The 'Intervention' refers to the *Northern Territory Emergency Response Act 2007* passed by the Howard Coalition government, which imposed the following 'special measures' on 73 prescribed communities: quarantining of 50 per cent of welfare money to be spent on 'basics'; compulsory acquisition of five-year leases on community land; alcohol restrictions; licensing of community stores; establishing 'government business managers' in each community; restricting pornography; and controlling publicly funded computers. These measures could to be applied to Indigenous communities because of the 'race power' section in the Constitution (51[xxvi]), which overrode the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*.
[3] A variation of this video can be viewed here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nA1wEzT6u8

The *Basics Card Parody* mashup (2013) attributed to 'John Public' features clips from the Centrelink video edited with other material to make explicit three aspects of racial discrimination disavowed by the government video:[4]

- That underneath the government's rhetorical commitment to integrating Indigenous Australians into the 'real economy' and providing people with 'real jobs', a population of primarily Indigenous people has been created whose access to the marketplace is largely mediated through government control;

- That this process is inherently and seriously social stigmatising for people who must use the Basics Card in everyday processes of consumption;

- That an implicit—but unspeakable—social distinction between 'fucked' and 'non-fucked' categories of individuals is an important vehicle through which racist policies and practices are rendered invisible and able to escape public critique.

This humorous intervention highlights the serious issue that—notwithstanding the suspension of anti-racial discrimination law to devise and apply the tool in the first instance—the majority of Basics Card recipients can still be presented by the government as 'just happening to be Aboriginal'. How is it possible for Centrelink to get away with a representation of a product so tenuously connected to its primary audience? To answer this question, the video needs to be understood in the context of broader scopic regimes that have and continue to shape Australia as a white state. There are very specific ways that we expect Indigenous people to appear within the network of institutional discourses that construct the meaning of Aboriginality in Australia. A representation that explicitly depicted Indigenous welfare recipients as excluded from ordinary market transactions and as precluded from indulging in legal vices available to other adult Australians would be more vulnerable to critical international and domestic scrutiny.

It is through the figure of an apparently middle-class white woman that the Centrelink video appears to speak to a subject imagined as an individual, rather than to a subject classified as part of a specific racial population. The *Basics Card Parody* shows how whitening the race of Basics Card recipients makes the Australian government look good. The face of a small Aboriginal girl featured on the Centrelink homepage (http://www.humanservices.gov.au) reinforces this communication of virtue since it was with recourse to the protection of Indigenous women and children that the Howard government justified its Intervention in 2007. This tension between racial appeal—on one hand—and racial ex-nomination—on the other—lies at the heart of neo-liberal subject formation in settler colonial nations. The remainder of this article will address the question of how it plays out in the institutional context of the university.

At first glance the discourses and scopic regimes of Centrelink may seem a long way from the academy but it is part of my aim to explore their shared basis in an ideological disposition Moreton-Robinson describes as the possessive investment in 'patriarchal white sovereignty' (2004). For the moment I ask you to note that Centrelink is likely to be a familiar institution to two of the largest populations in our universities: students and the casual academic staff who do well over half of our teaching and many of whom earn less than $25,000 per year.

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[4] The parody video can be viewed here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tCdGv4KbD4

The Neo-liberal University as a Disciplinary Site of Subject Formation

In her essay 'Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of Neo-liberal Academia' (2009), feminist academic Rosalind Gill notes the limits of research reflexivity when it comes to our most immediate and familiar environment of work. She asks:

> How might we make links between macro-organisation and institutional practices on the one hand, and experiences and affective states on the other, and open up an exploration of the ways in which these may be gendered, racialized and classed? (p. 4)

She identifies:

> … the endlessly self-monitoring, planning, prioritizing, 'responsibilised' subject required by the contemporary University. She requires little management, but can be accorded the 'autonomy' to manage herself, in a manner that is a far more effective exercise of power than any imposed from above by employers. (p. 6)

And she highlights the reluctance of academics to speak publically about the terms and conditions of our work, arguing that a sense of 'toxic shame' about not being good enough and 'a sacrificial ethos' often prevent us from talking about personal costs of insecure and precarious work within universities.

Gill acknowledges that individual experiences of the neo-liberal university are "(of course) deeply gendered, racialized and classed, connected to biographies that produce very different degrees of 'entitlement' (or not)" (2009, p. 15). But she doesn't connect the experiences of toxic shame and a sacrificial ethos to the specific subject position 'middle-class white woman' scrutinised in Moreton-Robinson's book *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* (2000)*.* This is where I think critical race and whiteness studies can extend existing examinations of the neo-liberal university. Towards the end of this article I will return to Gill's analysis and consider the problem of white virtue in light of Moreton-Robinson's recent work on virtuous states. In the next section I am guided by Goldberg as I consider some specific challenges of doing critical race and whiteness studies in the neo-liberal university.

~~Critical Race and Whiteness~~ Studies

In *The Threat of Race* (2009) Goldberg seeks to explain:

> the relation between racial evaporation and erasure as explicit conception across a broad swath of societies and the increasing difficulty as a consequence of considering racisms critically, of resisting them. (p. 30)

He argues that a broad consensus about the end of racism has been practically achieved through the displacement of anti-racist with anti-racialist discourses: "Anti-racialism is fundamentally concerned with 'decategorization'" (p. 22). It insists on the non-mattering of race as a category. Anti-racism by contrast "seeks to remove the condition not indirectly through removal of the category in the name of which the repression is enacted. Rather it seeks to remove the structure of the condition itself" (p. 22).

Moreover, Goldberg argues, "Antiracism requires historical memory, recalling the conditions of racial degradation and relating contemporary to historical and local to global conditions" (p. 21). This is in stark contrast to anti-racialism, which "seeks to wipe out the terms of reference, to wipe away the very vocabulary necessary to recall and recollect, to make a case to make a claim" (p. 21). Rather than disappearing race, anti-racialism displaces the sites of race from "broadly institutional [contexts], from which it is at least explicitly excised to the micro-relational of everyday interactions, on the one hand, and the macro-political strategizing of geo-global interests, on the other" (pp. 24-25). In this context, he notes the irony that "the call of antiracialism, while representing the triumph of the global, is always a *local* call … There is no global *antiracial* movement … Where antiracisms [were/are] truly global movements, antiracialism is never more than a local call" (p. 22). Goldberg highlights here the significant challenge for anti-racist scholarship in institutional contexts which are proudly anti-racialist. Specifically, he helps us to understand the ideological process through which the university and its disciplines have increasingly been placed off-limits to self-reflexive forms of critical inquiry.

While racism might be recognised as a problem for other nations or for a small minority of misfits in our own nation, it goes without saying that racism is not a problem for us or for our institution. It is only a problem when *we* are seen to make local issues *appear* to be about race. Bringing anti-racism home to institutions from which it is believed to have been formally banished is profoundly disruptive to what Moreton-Robinson calls 'the politeness of whiteness'. The next section will draw on recent work by Sara Ahmed to consider how the story of the university's successful journey to 'becoming diverse' produces a fiction of institutional happiness which acts as a wall against critical engagement with racism and whiteness.

'Overing' Anti-racism: Diversity and/as the Maintenance of [white] Institutional Happiness

Ahmed's book *On Being Included* (2012) explores how explicitly valuing different forms of cultural, religious and racial diversity can work as a mechanism of social exclusion in universities. Her important study is grounded in qualitative research with diversity practitioners in universities and participant observation based on her own experience with anti-racist work in universities. She argues that "To recognize the institutionality of whiteness remains an important goal of antiracist work, as does the recognition of institutional racism" (p. 44).

She presents numerous examples of how:

> Organizations manage their relation to external others by managing their image … Diversity work becomes about generating the 'right image' and correcting the wrong one … Diversity becomes about *changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organisations.* One of the way in which organisational whiteness is maintained is through the use of 'community' as a euphemism for 'race' … The implication is that the institution does not reach such communities—it does not include them—*because* they perceive the institution as excluding them. The problem of whiteness is thus redescribed here not as an institutional problem but as a problem with those who are not included by it. (p. 34-5)

And she makes an important move that allows us to think institutional whiteness and institutional racism as part of the same problem. Rather than seeing institutional racism as a bad habit that requires institutional good will and commitment to break, she suggests a new way of understanding the relationship between habit and will, such that:

> an institutional habit could be understood as a continuation of will … A habit is *a continuation of willing what no longer needs to be willed.* I think this formulation is especially useful for rethinking the category of 'institutional will'. A habit is how an institution keeps willing something without having to make something an object of will. (p. 129)

This institutional will is evident in the way that "statements such as 'we don't have a problem with racism' make those who report racism into the problem" (p. 145).

She argues that the claim to being a happy and diverse institution works as a method of protecting whiteness whereby "to speak about racism would hurt not just the organisation, reimagined as a subject with feelings, but also those subjects who identity with the organisation" (p. 146-7). Embodying this institutional problem is an experience that Ahmed and the diversity practitioners she interviewed described as 'hitting a wall'. I imagine many of us working with/in critical race and whiteness studies have experienced the scenario she describes:

> [They say] … Why are you always bringing up racism? Is that all you can see? Are you obsessed? Racism becomes your paranoia. Of course, it's a way of saying that racism doesn't really exist in the way you say it does. It is as if we had to invent racism to explain our own feeling of exclusion, as if racism was our way of not being responsible for the places we do not or cannot go … To preserve the possibility of getting on and moving on, we are asked to put racism behind us … Indeed, diversity enters institutional discourse as a language of reparation; as a way of imagining that those who are divided can work together; as a way of assuming that 'to get along' is to right a wrong … The promise of diversity *is* the promise of 'happiness' as if in becoming happy, or in wanting 'just happiness' we can put racism behind us. (p. 155-165)

This deployment of diversity against anti-racism is—as Goldberg notes—predicated on the legalistic elimination of obvious or formal codes of discrimination against those who don't quite inhabit the institutional norms. The claim that racism is past deprives non-white individuals of the terms of reference needed to legitimate claims of being excluded—being excluded is rendered a problem of subjective perception rather than an experience the institution engenders.

Ahmed argues that in the disorienting house of mirrors that Goldberg describes as 'racial neoliberalism':

> Only the practical labor of 'coming up against' the institution allows [*the wall which is the continuation of institutional will] to become apparent.* To those who do not come up against it, the wall does not appear—the institution is lived and experienced as being open, committed, and diverse … When you don't quite inhabit the norms, or you aim to transform them, you notice them as you come up against them. The wall is what we come up against: the sedimentation of history into a barrier that is solid and tangible in the present, a barrier to change as well as to

> the mobility of some, a barrier that remains invisible to those who can flow into the spaces created by institutions. (p. 175)

In this context she provides a welcome critique of "the hope invested in new terms [including] (mobilities, becomings, assemblages, capacities)" (p. 180). She observes how these terms are presented "as a way of overcoming, as if these terms allow us to get over the categories themselves" (p. 180). And she points to how:

> the hope invested in new terms can mean *turning away* from social restrictions and blockages by identifying restriction and blockages with the old terms [such as feminism and anti-racism] that we need to move beyond. Indeed, we need to note that the *narrowing* of the descriptive or analytic potential of the old terms is part of this narrative of becoming; a caricature of the work done by these terms allows the terms to be, as it were, 'given up'. (p. 180-1)

It is the work of critical race and whiteness studies in the neo-liberal university to witness to the wall that is the continuation of institutional will in our everyday practices and values of work. Those of us in possession of white privilege need to acknowledge the limits of our capacity to know what our institutions are for those without it and to take every opportunity to listen and learn from what our colleagues and students tell us about their experiences. And having listened, we need to take responsibility for doing what we can about specific problems. To quote Ahmed one more time:

> Things might appear fluid if you are going the way things are flowing. If you are not going that way, you experience a flow *as* solidity, as which you come up against. In turn, those who are not going the way things are flowing are experienced *as* obstructing the flow. We might need to be the cause of obstruction. We might need to get in the way if we are to get anywhere. We might need to become the blockage points by pointing out the blockage points. (p. 186-7)

Having worked with Ahmed's figure of the wall that is the continuation of institutional white will, I want to briefly return to Goldberg's discussion of anti-racialism. He concludes his argument in *The Threat of Race* (2009) as follows:

> Far from losing all analyticality, race has continued, silently as much as explicitly, to empower modes of embrace and enclosure, in renewed and indeed sometimes novel ways, as much shaping the contours and geographies of neoliberal political economy globally as modulated by them. As emb*race,* race constitutes a bringing in, an engulfing, elevating, consuming, and suffocating hold on populations. It is a holding up and a holding out, a tying and restricting. As enclosure acts, it continues to encircle, closing in and out, to fence off. Perhaps the symbolic sign (post) of race in our (neo-)neoliberal present reads 'DO NOT TRESPASS'. (p. 373)

This figure of an informal and de-categorised racism that promises an inclusive embrace while practicing macro and micro exclusions resonates with my experiences working in a large, prestigious Australian university on projects related to the recognition of Indigenous knowledge over the past decade. Like many similar universities, mine has consistently failed to meet targets for Indigenous student and staff recruitment in spite of advocating the importance of closing the education gap.

I sometimes wonder if this failure to recruit and retain Indigenous staff and students can be attributed to white institutional fantasies of the perfect

Aboriginal academic/colleague and the perfect Aboriginal student. Certainly I have come across utopian education strategies that see the Indigenous student as a blank slate ready to be filled with our institutional vision of what knowledge and success look like. Elsewhere in the education sector I have witnessed disturbing conversations about the inherent difference of Indigenous people and suggestions that we need to accommodate cultural proclivities—like excitability and restlessness—based on stereotypes derived from Myers-Briggs personality types. Certainly the fantasised Indigenous colleague is one who fits seamlessly into the existing organisational culture, and contributes to its happiness. What is feared most in a context where we feel like we are already working 24/7 is allowing entry to a person who could turn out to be 'hard work'. From a psycho-social viewpoint this fear can be read as a projection of the challenges the Australian state is yet to address to deliver justice to Indigenous people onto the body of prospective Indigenous colleagues.

Absent and (more or less eagerly) anticipated Indigenous colleagues and students are rendered through white institutional will as happy objects that we want to *have* in *our university.* The university participates in this way in a possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2004) which constructs Indigenous nations, communities and individuals as '*our* Indigenous culture, community, heritage or expert.' Being attentive to these white fantasies helps us to imagine the invisible wall that an Indigenous student or staff member might encounter when they are recruited as part of universities' inclusive agendas.

Virtue, Sovereignty and Race

In *The Threat of Race* (2009) Goldberg observes that:

> Once formal equality was guaranteed through state-mandated non-racialism, racism was born again as 'racism without race', racism gone private, racism without the categories to name it as such … In short, born again racism is an unrecognized racism for there are no terms by which it could be recognised: no precedent, no intent, no pattern, no institutional explication. (p. 23)

This 'racism without race' is exemplified in the rhetoric of Australia's current Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, in a recent speech about 'closing the gap' of health, employment, housing and education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people:

> A fair go for Aboriginal people is far too important to be put off to the judgment of history. We have to provide it now—or as soon as we reasonably can. I am confident of this: amidst all the mistakes, disappointment and uncertain starts, *the one failure that has mostly been avoided is lack of goodwill*. Australians are now as proud of our indigenous heritage as we are of all our other traditions. The challenge is to *turn good intentions into better outcomes*. (2014)

Note that racism has been excised as the historical source of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and that the problem is reframed as one of a gap between goodwill and intentions—on one hand—and mistakes, disappointment and suboptimal outcomes—on the other. The white subject of

racial neo-liberalism that emerges here is substantially defined through his possession of virtue.

It is in this context that Aileen Moreton-Robinson considers the corporate behaviour of white-settler states of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. Her analysis of these states' initial objections to provisions within the draft of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) and their eventual but vocally qualified acceptance of it hinges on an argument about the relationship between race, sovereignty and virtue.

She elaborates 'patriarchal white sovereignty' as a part of a national formation that is "underpinned by an excessive desire to invest in reproducing and reaffirming the state's ownership, control and domination" (2011, p. 647). And she argues that "virtue functions through reason within sets of meanings about patriarchal white ownership of the nation within the law, as part of commonsense knowledge, decision-making and socially produced conventions by which societies live and govern behaviour" (p. 647).

This possessive relationship to virtue enabled the four white-settler colonial states to continually claim the moral high ground in their negotiations with other parties even as they adopted apparently contradictory positions throughout the process. Her detailed reading of these States' arguments against this non-legally binding document shows how UNDRIP:

> ontologically disturbed patriarchal white sovereignty, which retaliated through political, legal and moral force to disavow the virtue of Indigenous rights. The Declaration was treated as an outside intervention that required the containment of the enemy within its borders: Indigenous peoples whose existence threatens the self-realization of patriarchal white sovereignty's interior truth. (p. 657)

She demonstrates the centrality of virtue to sovereignty. Being well-meaning becomes an un-contestable quality self-attributed to these white states:

> virtue functions within the ontology of possession, which occurs through the imposition of sovereign will-to-be on Indigenous lands and peoples that are perceived to lack will, thus they are open to being possessed. (p. 646)

Moreton-Robinson's account of the inherent connection between virtue and Indigenous dispossession is a valuable contribution to the literature on whiteness which is yet to come to grips fully with why our good intentions so routinely fail to produce social justice outcomes (see Trepagnier, 2010, p. 155).[5] Moreton-Robinson prefaces her argument about virtuous racial states as follows: "It would be a mistake … to place total responsibility with individual white subjects for their attitudes and behaviours when relations of force shape and produce the conditions under which racism flourishes" (p. 641). This raises the question of how our need to embody and perform virtue *as individuals* sustains broader relations of force within white racial states.

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[5] As Barbara Trepagnier's (2010) research on white women in the US found: "The role of well-meaning whites in the production of institutional racism is hidden by the way white Americans think about racism. The oppositional categories of racism obscure how institutional racism is produced because they effectively imply that 'racists' are the problem and 'nonracists' have nothing to do with racism. Nothing could be further from the truth … the not racist category itself produces a latent effect—passivity, which reinforces institutional racism" (p. 155).

The final part of this article will approach white virtue as a blockage to ACRAWSA's traction within the neo-liberal university. I will not be advocating performative inversions or assuming the self-styled identity of a race-traitor. I've addressed issues with such attempts to 'transcend' white subjective interpellation elsewhere (Nicoll 2006). Instead I'll consider how virtue functions as a blockage to those who "are not going the way things are flowing" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 186-7).

How does virtue support the continuation of institutional will that is encountered as a wall by those lacking the privileges to flow easily through the increasingly dispersed spaces of the neo-liberal university? I'll argue that a focus on being good and meaning well blocks our individual capacity for *virtuosity*—the art of resourcing, doing and disseminating CRWS. It keeps us stuck in what Ahmed (2006) describes as the 'non-performativity' of anti-racist commitment and encourages a credentialising approach to CRWS which is also evident in the desire for proximity to Professorial blackness as a ground of moral and intellectual authority. The questions this final section will pose are difficult ones for white people and they are questions also posed to myself:

- To whom or to what are we ultimately responsive and answerable?
- Who gets the very best of our work?
- Does our 'good' research performance reinforce institutional constructions of 'others' as the problem?
- Is our support of Indigenous sovereignty struggles active and intellectually engaged?
- Are our jobs in the neo-liberal university the main stake at play?
- Can a useful distinction be drawn between virtue and virtuosity and, if so, what would this mean for our understanding of the racial subject of the neo-liberal university?

Over many years of working I have observed that the gendered 'burden' of white virtue in settler colonial university contexts is often distributed between male colleagues' need to 'be right' and female colleagues' need to 'be good'. Ahmed recounts her experience of "the most defensive reactions [to her work] … from white male academics who think of themselves as 'critical'" (2012, p. 179), while Gill's examples and analyses speak to white women's attachments to a fantasy of ourselves as being 'good' people.

Gill describes how working within 'fast academia' and having to be 'always on in academia without walls' creates "an overheated competitive atmosphere in which acts of kindness, generosity and solidarity often seem to continue only in spite of, rather than because of, the governance of universities" (2009, p. 10). And she worries about "so much energy invested in navigating a course between being a good ethical 'citizen' of academia, and surviving—that is, not going under, getting sick or giving up one's work entirely." Using the example of the PhD examination she recounts: "When I say 'no, sorry, I can't do it' … I am immediately flooded with guilt, I feel a little bit less than the human being I want to be" (p. 11).

This worry about losing our ethical compass amidst demands to be more and more productive within systems that measure, calibrate and rank our efforts is telling. Post-feminist inducements to conduct ourselves as disciplined individual subjects in a 'gender blind' academy reinforce the possessive prerogatives of patriarchal white sovereignty by discouraging challenges to the terms by which it

defines what counts as excellence. Feminised virtue in the neo-liberal academy is a falling stock. This is evident in the relative weight accorded to teaching—where the feminised value of *being good*—by modelling ethical relationships to knowledge—is at the fore and the more prestigious work of research—where the masculinised value of *being right*—is the focus and ethics can become a formality of box-ticking.

White institutionalised virtue is sustained by the focus on and deep ideological commitment to the *individual* as the site through which power flows. Projects of solidarity organised around gender, anti-racism, Islamophobia and homophobia are anathema in our moment of post-feminism and anti-racialisation. We are *simply* being asked by our inclusive institutions to 'just' fit in and contribute—*as individuals*—to a collective happiness by performing what Ahmed calls the 'overing' of the injuries caused by social markers of difference. If we play our cards right, we might just be rewarded by a rare and valuable gift: that elusive form of economic security we attach to as 'my job'. A desire for and attachment to 'my job' is one of the hardest things to give up both psychologically and materially. But I think it is necessary if critical race and whiteness studies are to have a sustainable second decade within the neo-liberal university. Whether we are casual, contract or continuing staff, the only way to dismantle the white wall we present by being good and/or being right is to detach ourselves from a possessive relationship to an academic career path as currently defined.

This detachment is not reconcilable with an image of a positive, proud, and attractive white anti-racist subject who is 'over guilt and shame', critically scrutinised by Ahmed.[6] The detachment from 'my job' that anti-racist work actively engaged with Indigenous sovereignty struggles requires is much more risky than a performance of proud anti-racism. It is—frankly—fucking terrifying. It forces us to contemplate Centrelink—not simply as an object of academic critique but as a government institution that may play a role in our individual futures. As frightening as the prospect of 'being fucked' might be to those of us who are used to flowing through spaces of privilege, I think we need to imagine a future where our jobs don't have to be possessed at all costs. For the capacity to imagine this future changes our relationship to the neo-liberal university in ways that have implications for how well we do CRWS.

The title of this article signals a focus on working *in* the neo-liberal university. I want to end it by considering what it means to do CRWS as a way of working *on* the neo-liberal university and *between* sites of the neo-liberal university.

Gill (2009) encourages us to consider how:

> some of the pleasures of academic work (or at least a deep love for the 'myth' of what we thought being an intellectual would be like, but often seems at far remove from it) bind us more tightly into a neoliberal regime with ever-growing costs, not least to ourselves. (p. 15)

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[6] She notes how "adjectives [like] (positive, proud, attractive, antiracist) [make] antiracism just another white attribute or even a quality of whiteness (this rather likable whiteness would be one in which antiracism can be assumed)." And most disturbingly, she points to how this rebranded form of "Antiracism even becomes a discourse of white pride" (2012, pp. 169-170).

The costs of attachment to *my job* in the neo-liberal university will continue to accumulate as long as the individual subject of patriarchal white sovereignty is taken as a given. Working *within* white institutions encourages and authorises us to produce knowledge about, to practice virtuous orientations towards and to speak for others as individual teachers and researchers. In contrast, working *on and between* sites of the neo-liberal university through CRWS is predicated on and productive of different forms of solidarity. It involves taking a stand and declaring our investment in a specific kind of social future. Ahmed argues in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) that:

> speaking for something, rather than someone, often involves living with the uncertainty of what is possible in the world that we inhabit. Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground. (p. 189)

This recognition returns us to the ground of Indigenous sovereignty which will remain unrecognised as long as patriarchal white sovereignty possessively claims the virtue of its state of being and its being as State.

What does it mean to see CRWS not as *my* research, not as problematically linked to *my job* and as unrelated to my self-perceptions of being right or being good? Our everyday compliance or resistance within the neo-liberal academy is the thread which connects us as individual subjects to the possessive demands of the patriarchal white state. In this sense, virtue is an inherent rather than contingent way that our state of being and knowing as white people is circumscribed in settler colonial contexts. But giving up on virtue is absolutely not to give up on doing better, it is a necessary prerequisite for doing better.

Conclusion

Whenever we yield to the temptation of virtue we disarticulate the ontological state of 'being good' and 'meaning well' from specific terms of reference—or what might be called the Key Performance Indicators—of anti-racist work that spur us to 'do better' and to 'do our best'. When being good or being right or meaning well are detached from doing our best and doing better they become alibis for failing to confront the habits that support the continuation of white institutional will. Our ontological sense of being a good white person deflects criticism of our institutional passivity while our moral claim to being well-intentioned refuses responsibility for unintended consequences of this passivity. I want to return to Ahmed's point about how solidarity requires us to live with "the uncertainty of what is possible in the world we inhabit" (2004, p. 189). As long as our identities are bound up with being good and performing our good intentions, we will fail to test and realise what is possible when we offer our best to CRWS. By allowing the neo-liberal academy to define our best work and its often nutty strategic visions to define what doing better means, we are depriving ourselves, our colleagues and our students of the opportunity to *learn* what might be possible in the world we inhabit.

Possibilities for CRWS work *on and between* sites of the neo-liberal university are immanent rather than based on utopian visions of a different and better world.

And they return us to Centrelink. For many students and casual and contract academic staff, Centrelink is already a familiar social institution.

Margaret Mayhew is an early career researcher and contract lecturer who reflects on the experience of living and working between universities as a 'para-academic' in order:

> to encourage a mental shift away from haunting images of being fixed, or trapped or bound into a precarious and marginalised relationship to academia, into a reimagining of our position as being porous elements of institutions; as leaky portals between academia and other sectors; as positive contaminants of universities and creators of new forms of knowledge and society. (2014, p. 149)

Rather than subscribing to the neo-liberal university's interpellation of casual and contract employees not being 'good enough' for tenured positions, she has developed new ways of doing critical queer and anti-racist work through performance and volunteering between different sites of employment. She cites her rewarding work at the Melbourne Free University and the work of casual academics and artists from Sydney University conducting art classes in a high security refugee detention centre as concrete examples of "what critical inquiry and knowledge creation and action can become" (2014, p. 288) when the neo-liberal university is not assumed to be the centre of epistemological value.

In closing I want to return to the value of virtuosity. We can let Indigenous people do the heavy lifting, we can credentialise ourselves and we can cultivate proximity to Professorial blackness while possessively clinging to a state of white virtue and to *our* jobs *within* the neo-liberal university. Or we can cultivate virtuosity as workers *on and between* the visible and invisible walls of these white institutions. I am not positing an existential choice between assuming one kind of identity or another. In this moment of racial neo-liberalism, anti-racism is not a simple matter of buying into or out of opposing ideological regimes. What I'm suggesting is that we accept the responsibility in everyday life of refusing the easy choices that white virtue enables and that we try to do CRSW with all the intelligence, passion and courage we can muster in solidarity with one another. We need to become virtuosos—expert players of and with the neo-liberal university. I've learned some things about productive trouble-making over the last ten years as I'm sure many of us have. I hope we can use ACRAWSA as a forum of solidarity to share strategies to improve our performance.

Author Note

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